

implement" these simple features into their lessons *"even though the resources and materials are readily available"* (p. 176, my emphasis).

Bored yet? Don't be, despite the fact these elements of instruction are quite familiar. Because the payoff isn't in knowing these components; the payoff comes from *actually doing them*. What would happen if we did design *and implement* this simple, universally affirmed structure into our lessons? I'll say it again: We would make educational history.

Let's now look at the research. If this evidence won't change our priorities, then nothing will.

## The Stunning Impact of Effective Lessons

Researcher James Popham is a former colleague of Madeline Hunter's, and his research explicitly supports the same elements of effective lessons recommended here: a plan for delivering a "sequenced set of subskills . . . [in] step by step building blocks" (2008, p. 24).

He reserves special praise for the pivotal element: formative assessment—or checking for understanding, in Hunter's lexicon. Between each "learning progression" in the lesson, effective teaching requires that we collect formal or informal "assessment evidence" to make "informed adjustments." This ensures that the highest possible proportion of students will "master the target curricular aim" (p. 35).

So why—as I will argue—should we suspend all new initiatives until checking for understanding is consistently implemented in our schools in almost every lesson? For the simple reason that the effects of formative assessment on learning are *"among the largest ever reported"* (p. 2, my emphasis).

Popham is referring to research by Dylan William (2007), whose work demonstrates the folly of our current priorities, such as investing heavily in technology when it has had, so far, such limited impact on student learning. Like me, William is dismayed by the

parade of popular initiatives and trainings into which we pour time and money while our most effective, least expensive interventions are left at the curb.

He advocates, instead, for the same simple procedures we've been looking at, such as checking for understanding using dry-erase boards or hand signals for students to let teachers know if they are or aren't ready to move on. Just as Pfeffer and Sutton found that old, simple principles are the real drivers of improvement, William believes the principles that inform the elements of effective lessons have been with us for "thousands of years" (2007, p. 189).

The following evidence should convince us that such simple, old components of effective teaching should be our highest priority—at least until they are satisfactorily implemented by the majority of teachers. Lessons that include effective use of formative assessment and checks for understanding

- Would have *20 to 30 times* as much positive impact on learning than the most popular current initiatives.
- Are about *10 times* as cost-effective as reducing class size.
- Would add between *6 and 9 months* of additional learning growth per year.
- Account for as much as 400 percent "speed of learning differences"; students would learn *four times as fast* as a result of its consistent use (William, 2007, p. 186).

Impact like this helps explain the findings, cited earlier, that seem too fantastic to believe:

- Only *three years* of effective teaching will catapult students in the lowest quartiles into the third or even fourth quartile (Haycock, 2003).
- Effective teaching could eliminate the achievement gap in about five years (Kain & Hanushek in Schmoker, 2006).

- The highest-performing teachers ensure that students learn twice as much material in the same amount of time as their peers (Garnaut, 2007).

And it explains the recent research findings by Teach for America alluded to earlier. When asked to find what “concrete actions” made the biggest difference in a “lesson plan,” Teach for America was surprised to discover that one simple factor accounted for student success more than any other. The best teachers

Frequently check for understanding: Are the kids—all of the kids—following what you are saying? Asking “Does anyone have any questions?” does not work. (Ripley, 2010, p. 5)

In view of such evidence, how much longer can any self-respecting profession go on pursuing new, complex initiatives every year while ignoring the manifest under-implementation of what is truly effective? *Is it too much to suggest that we declare a temporary moratorium on all new initiatives until this game-changing lesson structure is fully understood and consistently implemented by professional educators in any given school—perhaps in all schools?*

Let’s now look at some real teachers who routinely employ the simplest forms of checking for understanding to ensure high-quality learning *and* high test scores for all.

## When Teachers Truly Use Formative Assessment

As you take in these brief profiles, keep in mind that these educators’ successes were in no way attributable to the use of complicated new strategies, technology, or specious attempts to group students by “learning styles” or ability. Rather, they were all about

effective, whole-class teaching in classrooms with a considerable range of levels.

## A Primary Grade Reading Teacher

I have been fortunate to know and observe several highly effective kindergarten and 1st grade teachers working in high-poverty schools. Their students learn to read two to three times as fast as their peers, often outperforming the affluent schools in their respective districts.

Their secret is that they spend far less time than their peers attempting to tutor multiple individuals or small groups while most of the students sit passively, waiting for their turn to learn (Ford & Opitz, 2002). From day one, these teachers prefer to provide well-organized, whole-class lessons (which I’ll detail in Chapter 4), replete with continuous checks for understanding. That’s why virtually all of their students can read within a few short months and can read and decode independently well before the end of the 1st grade.

Kristie Webster, whom I have already mentioned, works at J. B. Sutton Elementary School in inner-city Phoenix. One hundred percent of this school’s students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Sutton’s scores have soared in the last two years because all teachers now provide whole-class lessons where checks for understanding are consistently employed and monitored. In Webster’s 5th grade class, her inner-city charges write daily and read about 40 chapter books per year. Last year, 100 percent of her students passed the state writing exam; 92 percent passed in reading. At Sutton, the principal sits down with each grade-level team once a month to discuss common assessment results and to ensure that the curriculum is being faithfully implemented. (Again, this simple routine is an indispensable leadership practice; see DuFour and others in Schmoker, 2006, pp. 129–137.)



## Middle School English Teachers

Two English teachers at a middle school in Arizona spent a day—just one day—revamping their teaching around a simple formula: effective whole-class instruction in reading, discussion, and writing. All students read, discussed, and wrote argumentative papers about the *same readings*. Their lessons were models of step-by-step instruction and formative assessment. I saw, up close, that virtually every student succeeded on every major assessment (which assessed both skillful reading and effective writing, as most papers should). That very year, despite their 45 percent free and reduced-price lunch rate, the teachers' students rose from average to the highest achievers in the state—in a three-way tie with two of the most affluent schools in the state.

## High School Social Studies Teacher

An Advanced Placement (AP) Social Studies teacher I know worked in a high-poverty high school across town from his district's affluent sister school. The majority of his simple lessons were models of “interactive lecture” (which we'll examine in a moment): whole-class lecture and note-taking, punctuated by frequent opportunities for students to pair, share, and process their learning. He was always circulating, listening as students discussed, and checking for understanding to ensure they were taking good notes as he adjusted his instruction on this basis. As a result, almost twice as many of his students took and passed the AP History exam as in his affluent sister school.

Another high school teacher, who I've already mentioned, is Sean Connors, who provided very ordinary but effective lessons that always included careful modeling, the use of exemplars (for any writing lesson), and lots of think, pair, and share with continuous checks for understanding and adjustment of instruction. His preferred technology? An overhead projector. His teaching alone caused achievement on the state writing test to surge upward by 26 points—the largest gain by an entire high school, statewide (Schmoker, 2006).

Are we ready to redirect our time and leadership efforts away from the initiative of the month and toward the consistent implementation of sound curriculum delivered by such powerful, “old” instructional methods? One of the best ways to make that happen is for every school and district to create and employ a general lesson template throughout the school and district. Adlai Stevenson High School benefited greatly from the implementation of such a template.

## A Common, General Lesson Template at Adlai Stevenson High School

In Chapter 2, I discussed the impressive achievements of Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. It's of the most successful and celebrated high schools in the United States. Over a period of years, students at the school made immense, uninterrupted gains on every assessment administered—standardized tests, end-of-course and end-of-quarter assessments, and AP exams. The school increased its AP success rate by 800 percent (Schmoker, 2001). Stevenson is a model of effective team-based professional learning communities, where teachers work in teams to ensure that coherent curriculum and effective, ever-improving lessons are consistently implemented. Team-based learning communities are the indispensable structure for both monitoring and ensuring the implementation of common curriculum and effective teaching.

Tim Kanold is the former superintendent and principal of Adlai Stevenson High School, as well as an award-winning teacher and distinguished author of multiple math textbooks. He succeeded Rick DuFour in 2001. Over lunch, we talked about the simple elements of effective teaching that have made such a powerful difference at his school.

At Stevenson, there is a clear, written curriculum for every course, focused on a *severely reduced set of standards* determined by